

v.51, no. 2 (Apr 2000)

SACRED JOURNEY

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ APRIL 2000

SACRED JOURNEY[®]

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

*The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is
to encourage and support
a spiritual orientation to life,
to promote the practice of
prayer,
meditation,
and service to others,
and to help bring about
a deeper spirit of unity
among humankind.*

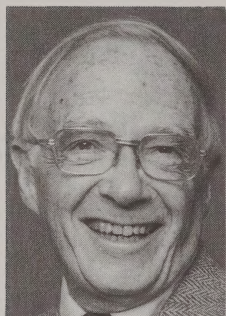
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Cover photo by Kristina Brendel, "Birch Cathedral," Botanical Gardens, Minsk, Belarus

FROM THE PRESIDENT



April is the month when we celebrate the joyous truth that all things can be brought into vibrant new life again—Easter bonnets, jonquils, even you and me.

To die to the old and be reborn is at the heart of the Christian message and of all the world's major faith traditions.

The anniversary of Buddha's birth and of the birth of Rama, one of the principal Hindu deities, both take place in April—the month when Jains honor the birth of Lord Mahavir, and Muslims celebrate the birth of a New Year. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Jews commemorate the exodus of the Israelites from bondage in the Passover festival, and Christians the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Whatever our spiritual path, the first Easter of this new millennium is a good time to look deeply into ourselves and ask, "What is the meaning of my life? What do I want above all else?" The Buddha said, "All beings want to be happy." True. But the question is, can the path we're on ever bring us real or lasting happiness? How can you and I move away from a life too often marked by selfishness, putting our own interests first, and ignoring the pain and suffering of others?

Let's face it. Most of us are not Mother Teresa, nor can we write huge checks to help feed the hungry. The

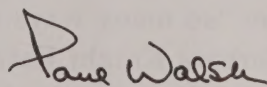
good news is that while most of us are never going to be saints or leave our jobs and families and work full time among the least of our brothers and sisters, we can consciously love and serve God and others in countless small, daily ways. There are ten thousand ways to bend and kiss the earth, as Rumi said. We can nourish our spirituality by praying—in solitude or with others—meditating, sacred reading, going on pilgrimages and retreats, and drawing strength and comfort from others at conferences like Fellowship in Prayer's "Companions on the Sacred Journey" gathering in Princeton this June.

The important decision is to make a sustained commitment to a spiritual practice that, as time goes by, becomes indistinguishable from the rest of your life.

For example, often, as I walk the labyrinth built in the back garden of Fellowship in Prayer by the Buddhist nun, Ani Trime Lhamo, I meditate on the Refuge Chant that's part of our regular Thich Nhat Hanh group meetings. We vow to offer joy to one person in the morning and to help relieve the grief of one person in the afternoon. We look for opportunities to do that in the spirit of this anonymous prayer:

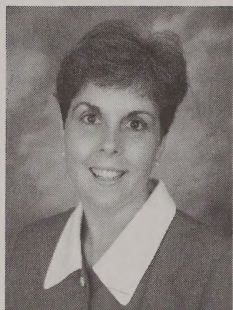
Lord of the excluded,
Open my ears to those I would prefer not to hear,
Open my life to those I would prefer not to know,
Open my heart to those I would prefer not to love,
And so open my eyes to see
Where I exclude you.

May we and all beings love and serve each other on our sacred journey.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Paul Walsh". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Paul" and last name "Walsh" clearly distinguishable.

Paul Walsh

FROM THE EDITOR



Two winters ago my heart was heavy. In the eighteenth century "heaviness" was a term used for what we today might call depression. In heavy times, fighting for survival leaves little energy for other things. Longtime readers will recall my plea for prayer as I told of my youngest child's leukemia diagnosis. Cards and assurances arrived and I clung to each one. One sat propped up on my desk over the many months to declare, "Know that the beacons have been lit in Scotland." Those words became a visible reminder that bright, guiding, beseeching prayers regularly flashed near and far through the darkness when I was mostly spiritually mute.

For some of you or those you love, this is a season of heaviness. Our feature interview with Susan Gregg-Schroeder tells of depression's dark night and also of the hard-learned "gifts" a journey underground can secretly nourish. Brother Wayne Teasdale teaches of sacred reading as a ladder of prayer that many climb daily. John Anello, a self-described "lost soul" describes a winding road of spiritual exploration that has taught him there are "so many ways to practice, so many ways to love." Barbara Knight Katz learns to look at her illness as an icon that reveals the depths of God's grace. Finally,

Lorraine V. Murray shows how simplifying and downsizing can free up time and energy for giving rather than getting.

Easter is approaching and Megan's twenty-six months of chemotherapy are past. Her life is gloriously restored. To mark this passage, I picked up the Scottish get-well card to move it off my desk. Only then did I look fully at the glorious daffodil on its cover. This beauty was lost on me before. It was there but I could not see it. I could not hear the story it told: The flower now in full bloom was once a sad-looking bulb forced into hard ground and left for a long, dark cold season. Then Spring came. So too with my heart, and, I pray, with yours.

For now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come.

Song of Songs 2:11-12



Robert F. Campbell

Blessings,

Rebecca Laird

Rebecca Laird

Susan Gregg-Schroeder



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

The Dark Night of Depression



Susan Gregg-Schroeder

Susan Gregg-Schroeder serves as Minister of Pastoral Care and Spiritual Formation of First United Methodist Church of San Diego. She and her husband Stan are parents of two grown children. After a long unexpected struggle with depression, Susan wrote In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression. Her book blends personal wisdom with pastoral counsel and is interlaced with powerful prayers. When we talked, the sun was shining in Southern California, and Susan's quiet, sure presence filled her office. She expressed hope that her words might lift someone struggling with depression. If you know someone who needs a copy of this journal, pass yours on and contact us for a free replacement copy. Don't delay. Be a messenger of hope.

Rebecca Laird: How did you first recognize your depression as a serious illness? Tell us some of your story.

Susan Gregg-Schroeder: I had a number of symptoms that came on gradually. I didn't enjoy things I used to enjoy. I had difficulty concentrating. I was nervous. I couldn't eat. I felt split apart and helpless. As a person of

faith, I felt abandoned by God. My spiritual director, who was also a therapist, realized that I was exhibiting many of the symptoms of depression and brought that to my attention. I ignored and denied what he said. I thought nothing was wrong with me and if I prayed harder and longer and had more faith, I would beat this. Eventually I did go and see a psychiatrist, who is also a member of our church. It was one of the most humbling experiences of my life. He recommended hospitalization and medication. I told him I would rather be dead than hospitalized. I had visited parishioners on the psychiatric ward, led worship services there, and suddenly, I was a patient on this same ward. I was signed in and that first night was so strange. I didn't sleep at all. I wandered the halls wondering, What am I doing here? What have I done wrong? Yet something deep inside knew that I needed to be safe and in that place.

How did depression impact your personal spirituality and your role as a pastor?

We all have times of darkness and despair, but depression is different—it is deeper and lasts so much longer. There is a feeling that you will never get out of it. Often there is a spiritual element—a feeling of total abandonment and hopelessness—that accompanies depression. Depression was for me a very spiritual issue.

At work, at first, I suffered in secrecy. I did have two subsequent hospitalizations and kept very quiet about my depression. Some of the church staff knew what I was going through, but the congregation certainly didn't know. I kept silent my burden of shame. Even when I was in the hospital and was allowed a pass to leave for a few hours, I would come to the church and prepare

newsletters for my church groups to keep up this pretense that everything was normal.

People later would say, 'Oh, you looked and seemed so normal, we had no idea you were going through this.' If I would have had cancer or something else they would have surrounded me with love. Instead the church supervisors and hierarchy didn't really know what to do with me. There was discussion that I should be put on involuntary disability. I was already suffering with feelings of rejection and abandonment.

For my church to abandon me would have been the ultimate rejection and abandonment for me. Some people may need to be on leave during a depression, but church leaders or supervisors need to be sensitive to the individual needs of the pastor or person. I needed to be involved in work. It was what kept me going.

*10% of men
and 24% of
women will
experience a
depressive
disorder
during their
lifetime.*

As a clergy person I think my depression helped my pastoral counseling a lot. It also helped others who were going through other dark nights of the soul identify with me. Even though my pain is different from their cancer, loss of a job, or divorce, the pain of going through darkness is something that I can share with my parishioners. I think they feel that from me. A wounded healer can become a blessing. To serve communion, to be in front of the church with a pretense that you have it all together is so unreal. To say, 'Yes, I am human. Yes, God can work through broken vessels. Yes, God can work through me,' was very difficult for me, and it still is. Depression is awful, I would never have chosen it. Yet I am thankful that I am a different person today: a wiser, more sensitive person who

has learned more about myself, and can be more open to use God's gifts to help others because of it.

How did you move from secrecy to outspoken advocacy for those suffering from depression?

Our culture wants to move people out of depression as fast as possible—get the medicine, get this, do that. But depression has to be treated holistically. In the hospital I was treated clinically. My spiritual and other issues were

not addressed. I had to find that through therapy. I chose a spiritual counselor who could bring that aspect into my healing process.

Symptoms of

Depression:

Sleep disorders

Irritability

Anxiety

Appetite disturbance

Loss of energy

and drive

After some months, I wrote an open letter to the church and explained what depression is and admitted that I was struggling with it and had been in the hospital. Our church has many twelve step and Alcoholics Anonymous groups, but depression

still had that stigma. No one had talked openly about depression before. People came out of the woodwork and told me their own stories. At that point our parish nurse set up an information evening on depression and we had a turn-away crowd. We set up an ongoing depression support group. Mostly, after speaking out about my illness, I felt tremendous relief.

Your book identifies several “gifts” that deep pain can yield. Tell us of your growing understanding of the other side of suffering.

Psalms 57 has always been one of my favorites psalms. One verse says, “In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge until the destroying storms pass by.” There are many reasons for people to find themselves in these destroying storms. For me it was having the illness of a deep clinical depression. Being in the darkness can be frightening for most of us but I’ve found it can also be transforming.

Depression, like any dark night of the soul, can be a wonderful teacher if we only allow God to speak through our pain. *In Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore reminds us that these gifts do not yield themselves easily. They only begin to emerge from the depths as we are present to our darkness and our pain. For me, that is what it now means to me to enter into the shadow of death.

Reflecting on my own depression led me to identify six gifts that suffering can yield over time.

Vulnerability

The first gift is vulnerability and it is a gift that encompasses all of the other gifts. I see vulnerability unfolding in three ways: There is a vulnerability to God, an admission of one’s own vulnerability, and making ourselves available and vulnerable to others. This last vulnerability is perhaps the most difficult for those struggling with depression because of the stigma and shame associated with mental illness. I believe when we are able to admit our vulnerability to God, to ourselves, and to the community, we are graced with a power to help heal ourselves. Our wounds can then become signs of hope.

Discovering One’s True Self

Like many people, I have lived most of my life trying to meet the expectations of others. I am beginning to discover the gift of myself as a child of God, who is whole in mind, body, and spirit. Discovering one’s authentic self ultimately

requires an openness to God who has placed a treasure of great price in the field of our souls that is waiting to be discovered.

Patience

Another gift is patience with the process. Patience is not one of my virtues. We all want to move out of our pain as quickly as possible. We cannot rush our healing or try to break out of the darkness of our cocoon until we have been transformed.

Paradox and Mystery

Suffering makes us struggle with issues that offer no easy answers. Depression has taught me to live in the tension of paradox and mystery. When I need to feel in control of my life I must let go and trust. As I heal and help others, I must struggle between simply being and acknowledging the importance of doing and working in the healing process. We must live in the tensions between *chronos* (chronological time) and *kairos* (spiritual time). When one has suffered deeply, there comes an understanding that mystery is a constant part of life.

Creativity

Creativity is often defined far too narrowly. We all have creative potential. There are tangible expressions of creativity in all of us, but our fears often thwart those creative impulses. We think of creativity as drawing, painting, sculpture, writing, and photography to name a few means of creative expression. Yet one of the most creative activities is to be able to envision our lives in a new way. And that requires being open to God's creative spirit moving through us and transforming us.

Hope

The gift of hope is something I can talk about as I have worked through the deepest part of my depression. Hope doesn't come in the beginning of the journey. First, there is despair and abandonment, shame, and guilt. Only in time does hope break through. As I look back, I realize that I wasn't

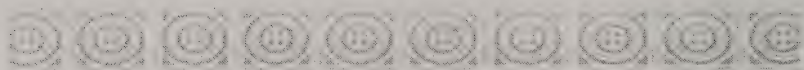
alone in my darkest depression even though I felt abandoned. With the help of others, I was able to choose life.

Hope is knowing, like the prodigal son or daughter, that we can come home and be welcomed with all the riches that God provides.

What key piece of advice can you share about dealing with depression?

It was hard for me to recognize that depression was both a spiritual and a medical issue. Prayer is needed, but God also works through doctors and medications. I was reluctant to take medication. I tried many different medications that didn't work. But when I finally found the one that did, it made such a difference. I was then able to work on the spiritual and psychological issues. I needed the combination. It is very important to seek help. Unfortunately, studies have shown that clergy or family practitioners are the least helpful or knowledgeable in dealing with depression. If you or a loved one is dealing with depression and you reach out but don't get help from the first person, go to someone else. Be persistent. You need to be an advocate for your own health and spiritual well-being.

P R A Y E R S



O God!

Make good that which is between us,
unite our hearts
and guide us to paths of peace.

God of the weak! Thou art my God!

Forsake me not.

Leave me not a prey to strangers, nor to
my enemies.

If thou art not offended, I am safe.

I seek refuge in the light of thy countenance,
by which all darkness is dispelled,
and peace cometh in the here and the hereafter.

~The Prophet Muhammad

Cause us, our Father, to lie down in peace, and raise us again
to enjoy life. Spread over us the tabernacle of Your peace,
guide us with Your good counsel and save us for the sake of
Your name. Be a shield about us, turning away every enemy,
disease, violence, hunger and sorrow. Shelter us under the
cover of Your wings, for You guard and protect us when we
go out and when we come in to enjoy life and peace. Spread
over us the shelter of Your peace. Blessed are You, O God,
who spreads the shelter of peace over us and over all the world.

~From the Evening Prayers in the Synagogue

These prayers are from a compilation by the Week of Prayer for World Peace Committee. For more information contact Reverend Sidney Hinkes, 1, The Bungalow, Bremlingham Road, Malmesbury, SN16 0DQ, England.

COMPANIONS ON THE PATH



The Ladder of Prayer

Wayne Teasdale

The activity of prayer has been long likened to climbing a ladder. Each rung represents a new level of experience, beginning with the lower rungs immersed in words, or petition, worship, and devotion. The higher rungs of this sacred ladder transcend words. In my own experience, the Divine has no need to employ words or language or any verbal expressions at all. God often communicates in much more subtle, direct, and interior ways: through impulses of the will, movements or stirrings of the heart, events in the imagination, illuminations of the mind, through archetypes and images in dreams, and through unitive touches varying in intensity, duration and type.



Brother Wayne Teasdale, Ph.D., a retreat leader, spiritual director, and professor has spent long periods of time in India, where he was initiated into Christian Sannyasa—the life of renunciation and dedication to the quest for God by his mentor, the late Bede Griffiths, O.S.B. Brother Wayne will present a workshop on The Mystic Heart at Companions on the Sacred Journey, Fellowship in Prayer's 50th anniversary conference to be held in Princeton, NJ, June 16,17,18, 2000.

All genuine prayer, in the Christian tradition, is relationship with God. Contemplation is a fuller, more mature form of prayer, of intimacy with the Divine. It begins with a deep, urgent longing for God, a pure desire for contact. This urgent desire gives form to a structure or discipline of contemplative prayer, of resting in the quiet and the stillness of the Divine Presence. Daily periods of contemplation become a regular feature of a life given over to the spiritual or mystical journey. This is an active or acquired form of contemplation because it implies our vigorous effort. As contemplation takes root in our being and the Spirit assumes the initiative more in us, contemplative prayer shifts to its passive forms, where God is doing most of the work.

St. John of the Cross, the great sixteenth century Spanish mystic, defines contemplation as “nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love. . . .” Mystical prayer, which is what contemplation is, gives us direct or immediate experience of the Divine Reality through an intense awareness, interior consolations, illuminations, and profound unitive raptures in which we are taken up into the Divine life and vitality itself. Contemplation is, as Thomas Keating, the Trappist spiritual teacher often says so eloquently, “a tasting knowledge of God.” In a very real sense it conveys us beyond simple faith to ultimate knowledge through experience. We no longer merely believe in the Source; We know it directly and immediately, that is, without any mediation.

In the monastic tradition of the West there is an ancient practice of contemplative prayer called *lectio divina*, and it depends on a ladder-like approach. *Lectio divina* literally means divine reading, and the first stage names the whole practice. It has four rungs to it: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*. *Meditatio* means meditation but is better translated as reflection in order not to confuse it with the



Sara Wuthnow

modern understanding of meditation which implies an Eastern, non-discursive form of sitting prayer. *Oratio* is a term for a feeling level of prayer; it is affective, even emotional. It is also called the prayer of the heart, while *contemplatio* is a word used to express the reality of resting in the Presence of God.

Lectio is a form of prayer designed to facilitate the awakening to and cultivation of contemplative consciousness. Millions of people, in and outside of monasteries, climb this ladder of prayer every day. In the

*Contemplation
begins with
a deep, urgent
longing for
God*

first stage, one concentrates on a text in scripture or some other sacred work. We read not for information but for inspiration in prayer. The amount of reading is unimportant, and normally it will only be a page or two, sometimes even only a paragraph or a sentence. Once we are struck by something, we stop, put the text aside, and then begin to reflect on it.

This reflection is not an analysis of the passage in question; it is a kind of intuitive pondering, a lingering over it, and a very deep assimilation of the meaning, which is often personal. When reflection reaches its term—and this happens quite naturally—one then passes to the stage or rung of affective prayer, a moment in which one prays one's heart out and is moved to interior acts of love for and commitment to God in Christ. The stage of affective prayer really enlivens the heart and inspires a movement of the will; it is already a taste of contemplation. When this has reached a certain fullness, the person then enters the fourth moment, rung or stage of contemplation in which one finds rest in the Divine itself, bathing in the radiance and love of God's overpowering reality.

Lectio, as a process, is a sure way to develop the gift and capacity of contemplation. It is a method that was learned and cultivated through trial and error over the centuries. The material absorbed in reading and digested in reflection, provides the spark of inspiration in the prayer of the heart that is primarily a movement of the will to an expression of profound love, and this love then bears fruit in rest. John of the Cross succinctly sums up the inner process of *lectio* as a way of contemplation: "Seek in reading and you will find in meditation (reflection); knock in prayer (affective prayer), and it will be opened to you in contemplation."

We do not always realize what a radical suggestion it is for us to read and be transformed rather than to gather information. We are information seekers. We love to cover territory. It is not easy for us to stop reading when the heart is touched; we are a people who like to get finished. *Lectio* offers us a new way to read. Read with a vulnerable heart. Expect to be blessed in the reading. Read as one awake, one waiting for the beloved. Read with reverence.

Macrina Wiederkehr, author of A Tree Full of Angels

Companions on the *SACRED JOURNEY*

A Conference Celebrating
Fellowship in Prayer's
50th Anniversary

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday
June 16, 17, and 18, 2000

Presented by

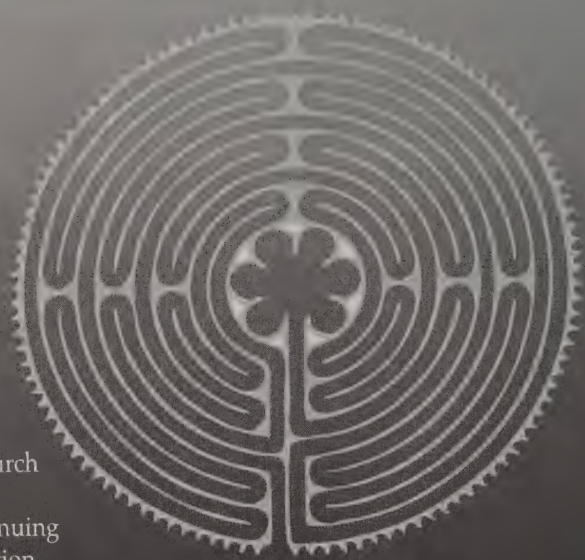
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The pastoral beauty of the campus and the historic, centuries-old buildings of Princeton University will be home to Fellowship in Prayer's 50th Anniversary celebration.

In that beautiful setting, at the start of the new millennium, you will meet and share your hopes and doubts, your fears and faith, with a unique gathering of spiritual leaders, doctors, authors, therapists, and other companions on the path whose search for and experience of the Divine or Ultimate Source can help you on your own sacred journey.

Program

Friday, June 16

2:00 to 6:00 p.m. — Registration

6:00 p.m. Shabbat Service —

Rabbi Marcia Prager

8:00 p.m. Keynote Speakers —

"Hide and Seek: The Languages of Prayer" —

Drs. Ann and Barry Ulanov

Saturday, June 17

8:00 a.m. — Registration

10:30 a.m. — Workshops (each to be offered twice: at 10:30 a.m. to noon and at 2:00 to 3:30 p.m.)

- ◆ Prayer and Human Wholeness — Rebecca Laird
- ◆ Frustration as a Doorway to Spiritual Growth — Robert Corin Morris
- ◆ The Path of Blessing: Experiencing the Energy and Abundance of the Divine — Rabbi Marcia Prager
- ◆ Celtic Christianity — Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB and Mairead Doherty
- ◆ Awakening Love and Compassion — Venerable Gelongma Trime Lhamo

◆ The Mystic Heart — Br. Wayne Teasdale

◆ Creativity as a Spiritual Practice — Dr. Rachel Harris

◆ Your Spirit at Work — Denise Lyons

◆ The Labyrinth: Walking a Sacred Path — Beth Haynes

◆ Dancing as a Way of Prayer — Robin Becker

2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. — Workshops

4:00 p.m. — Prayer Circles

8:00 p.m. Evening Address —

"Prayer, Healing, and the Respiritualization of Modern Medicine" — Dr. Larry Dossey

9:15 p.m. — Taizé service in the University Chapel

Sunday, June 18

10:00 a.m. Closing Ceremony: Music, dance, and Psalms: Ways of celebrating the sacred journey.

For information —

Call 609-924-6863

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



The Practice of Many Paths

Where is Home?

John Anello

Pure and simple, I am a lost soul. And I probably would have it no other way, had I a choice. What "soul" is for sure no one has been able to definitively determine—it seems to be one of those great spiritual mysteries that must be taken on faith and faith alone. But my feeling is that regardless of what soul may be, there is no place on this earth where it can comfortably reside. But this yearning to find a "home" for the soul has been the primary motivator in my personal search for a spiritual practice that is fulfilling. However, at this stage of the journey, it seems apparent that whether one believes in the Pure Land or Heaven, unless you are divinely blessed, there can be found no "perfect bliss" here on earth. So as is true for many "seekers," the search for my spiritual home continues and probably will continue for the rest of my life. This yearning, this search, for a fulfilling practice has led me over the years to many different paths: gurus, Yoga, Zen, Ch'an, TM, est, psychotherapy, and, currently, back

John Anello is a writer and editor in New York City. He lives with his nephew, the poet Mathew Demek. A longer version of this article originally appeared in Ch'an Magazine.

to my original faith: Catholicism. But this is not an article about how after having tried all these practices, I have finally found my spiritual center, because I am not sure that I have or ever will. This is also not an intellectual analysis of the similarities and differences of the many different spiritual paths. This is simply an article of how one seeker has continued to leap from one practice to another—exactly what the gurus, yogis, and Zen masters tell us not to do—and how various spiritual practices have enhanced my Christian faith.

In truth, I think my primary practice, at the core, has actually always been as a Catholic. That is the tradition in which I was raised. Unlike many, I am thankful for that experience. So many people have horror stories about their Christian upbringing. But my experience has been quite different, having come away with a feeling of love, charity, and forgiveness for my fellow human beings and myself. The teachings of loving your neighbor as yourself and loving God have remained with me all my life, with Christ as my guru and the Christian teachings always directing my heart. However, being a Christian has not prevented me from becoming a “disciple” of a modern sage; or participating in other philosophies and practices. I have come to view the challenge of spiritual practice as being the same as the central challenge of life itself: transcendence of differences, discrimination, and competition; cultivation of love and compassion; and the unveiling of simple wisdom to guide us through life. I keep asking myself whether in the end, truly, if all sentient beings are Buddhas and if we have only our inner wisdom to guide us, is there any difference between one path and another? Is it possible that the entire lifelong spiritual journey constitutes spiritual practice, rather than just the specific practice in which I may be involved at any given time?

One must ask, then, is there ever a “bad” place to start? It has often saddened me to hear Zen and Yoga practitioners, for example, speak scathingly about their previous practice or the faith in which they were raised, such as Christianity or Judaism. And similarly, I’ve heard many seekers talk of their current practice as being the only “true” practice. I recall one former Catholic stating that Buddhism was “better” than Christianity because Buddhism is the “only” way to enlightenment, but then again, I’ve heard returnees to the Christian faith call Buddhism “evil” or “demonic.” Sadly, these comments negate whatever joy, wisdom, or inspiration may have been garnered and leave the individual feeling that he or she made a big mistake, wasted a great deal of time and energy, was wronged, or was deluded or ignorant. The spiritual path must begin somewhere, maybe anywhere, and shouldn’t one be thankful for that opportunity of the first step? Even more to the point, is there any beginning or end in practice? Any right practice? Any wrong practice?

Having been raised in the 60’s, the height of rejection of the status quo, I, like many, ultimately “rebelled” against my original religious tradition to find another practice more suitable to my individual character. But for seekers in this country, the choice has often not been singular—that is, a simple replacement of one tradition for another. For some of us, as we have “progressed” in our spiritual expression, we have gone through second and third transformations, if not more. I am reminded that even the Buddha himself did not start out as a “Buddhist.” He was a yogi, an ascetic one at that. If he himself had to go through spiritual transformation, doubt, and confusion, almost to the point of starvation, then what is the challenge to us? After thousands of years, it seems the same challenge con-



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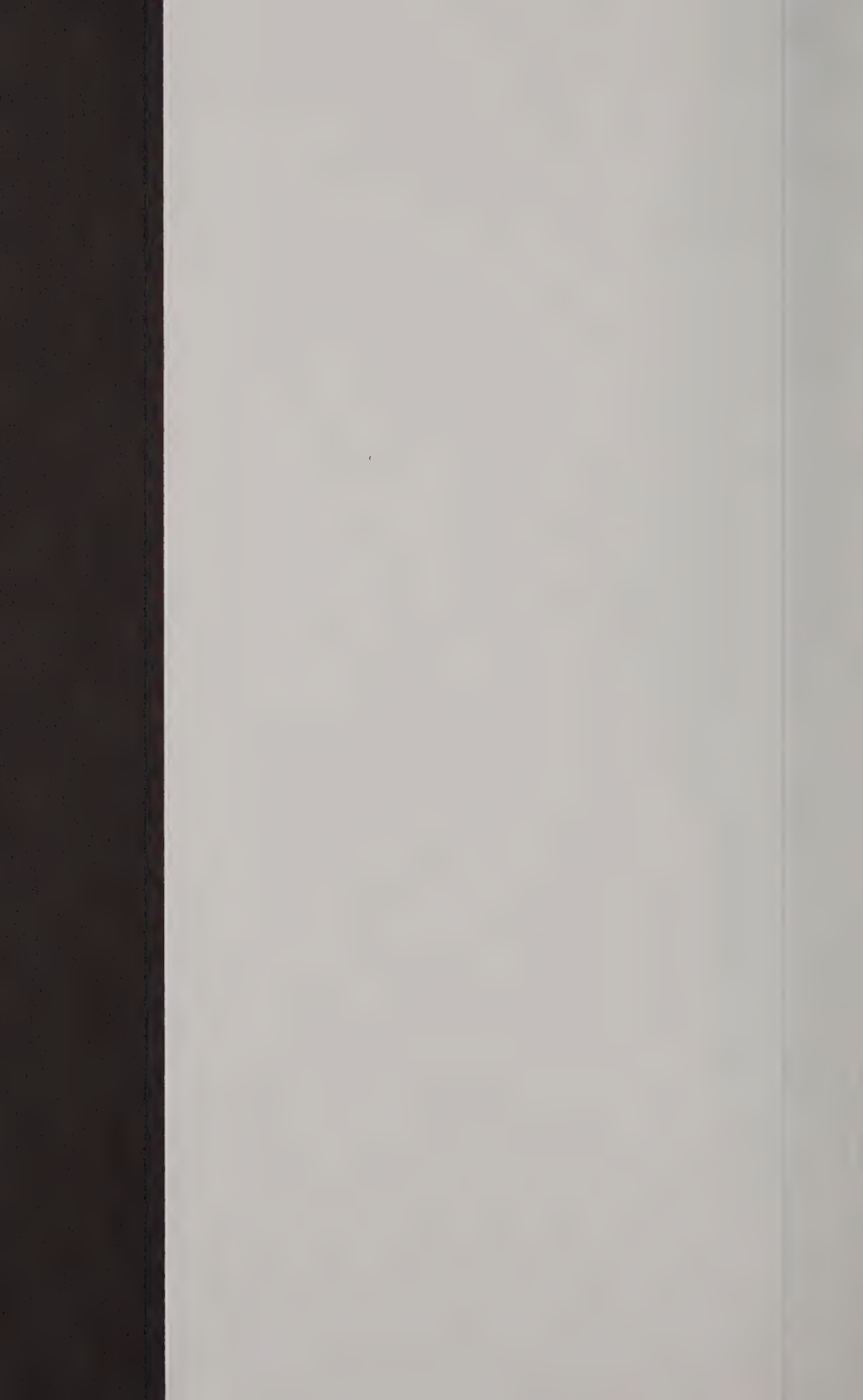
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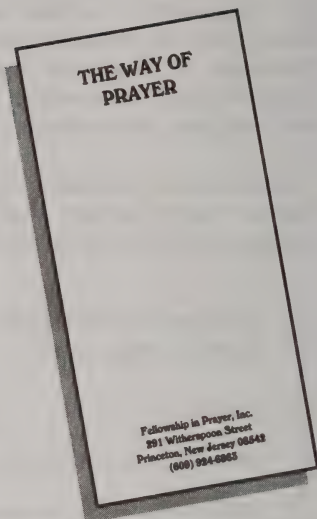
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tinues to arise: Can we continue to allow ourselves and others and our spiritual practice to evolve?

What is True Spiritual Practice?

It is true that when one falls in love with a spiritual practice, it may seem at the time that the practice is truly the *only* perfect one, the only *true* practice, the only one that will lead to enlightenment or God. And often, spiritual teachers will support that belief. I remember once hearing a parish priest say to his congregation that they should not attend ceremonies at places of worship of friends of other faiths because they had to be “true” to their own faith. It seems understandable that we would think that our current practice is the only way to enlightenment or God, because it takes that type of firm commitment to maintain one’s practice. True practice of Zen, Yoga, Catholicism, or any other spiritual tradition is not for the faint of heart.

What I have found to be true, over time along the spiritual journey, is that it is not the practice itself that matters, but rather the way of practicing—with full heart, full mind, and full body to the best of my ability. In this way all practices have nearly merged into one. In essence, there may come a point at which there is no practice at all, making everything practice. When all is said and done, maybe it is the way we choose to practice *our lives* that truly makes all the difference. Maybe it is not whether we meditate deeply or pray often that determines the depth of our spirituality, but rather the way in which we love people, accept differences among people, break down the barriers between people, and give ourselves to the aid of the less fortunate. This certainly sounds like the way of the bodhisattva, but it also reflects the teachings of Yoga and Christianity. In Zen, the vow that has always moved

and inspired me is "Sentient Beings Are Numberless; I Vow to Save Them." But what is "saving"? This vow is very similar to Christ's teaching: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

I ask these questions because I have fallen in love with and then fallen out of love with almost all of the mentioned practices. Some teachers, gurus, and spiritualists would say that this moving around is wrong practice or downright nihilism. It often has been stated that a seeker should

*So many ways
to practice.*

*So many ways
to love.*

dig one very deep well rather than many shallow ones. But I have had to repeatedly ask myself, what does a seeker do if he/she has been digging the same well for a prolonged period of time and come up dry? Should one climb out of that hole and begin digging in

another spot? Or to put it in more straightforward terms, what happens when a practice stops working for you and you are powerfully drawn to another? Some people with greater fortitude—or denial mechanisms—may be able to force themselves to stay with one practice and tough it out. But should those who do not be considered failures? Are we free to make our own choices about our spirituality?

To quote from the I Ching: "In the very center of each of us there dwells an innocent and divine spirit. If we allow ourselves to be guided by it in every situation, we can never go wrong." In my own case, I feel that I have been very lucky in that I have dug many wells and have struck water

each time. That doesn't mean that I have found God or reached enlightenment. It just means that each spiritual tradition in itself has enriched my life and provided me with inspiration and a little more knowledge of what it means to be human.

A recent bout of pneumonia, followed by depression, propelled me to turn to my Bible for wisdom and support. The words of the Gospel penetrated deeply and brought me to tears many times. One particularly beautiful and nurturing passage was, "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them"

However, this deep spiritual reaction was not very different from one experienced a number of years ago when meditating with a guru. Spontaneously, while meditating on this guru's picture, I had begun sobbing and then slowly crying until a torrent of tears streamed down my cheeks; the crying then began to transform into giggles and escalated to uncontrollable belly laughter. No, these weren't signs of having gone temporarily insane; rather, I felt joyous and alive. The feeling was one of having returned home and having found my guru who would take me to the other shore, as he often promised to those who followed him devoutly.

But over time, I found the guru's teachings were not right for me. I realized that I could not force my heart to follow him anymore. This guru had spoken often of Yoga practice, which I began to investigate more deeply on my own. At a Yoga center in New York, I started to meditate

on the Lord Siva, the Hindu deity representing destruction of ignorance and often seated in the lotus posture in deep meditation. Asanas and yogic breathing exercises became daily practices, and ultimately I received a Siva mantra from an ascetic yogi. Yogis often speak of merging with your chosen deity, and that is what began to occur in my case. The mantra brought inner quiet and peace of mind. Over time, a new, deeper power and joy of meditation began to unfold. This was a practice that was truly collective, paying attention to the body, the mind, and the spirit. A couple of hours of Yoga postures relieved the body of stress, Siva mantra meditation opened the spiritual heart, and studying Yoga texts such as the *Brahma Sutras*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, and *Bhagavad Gita* purified the mind. I truly thought this was the end of my search, that through disciplined Yoga practices, absolute bliss would be attained and all *samskaras* (mental impressions) would fall away. But it was not to be. Over time, the mantra began to fade.

I was soon on my own again . . . until Zen. The need was for a spiritual practice that would allow me to join with other seekers in many hours of silent meditation without praises to anything or anyone. And that is what Zen practice provided. During a weekend retreat at a Zen center in upstate New York, I fell into a deep meditation and the entire meditation hall seemed bathed in snow. Then the gong sounded and one of the monks began pounding on a kettledrum. Another monk chanted in deep resonant tones: "*Let me respectfully remind you—life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by, and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken . . . awaken. Take heed. Do not squander your life.*" It is called the *Evening Gatha*, and with each pound of the drum, that



Ron Wagner

gatha penetrated deeper and deeper into my heart. I was rooted to my *zafu* (cushion), and the tears started streaming down my cheeks. Again, I felt that I had arrived.

Of course, though, I hadn't arrived (maybe because I had never left). A constant internal emotional battle between practices continued: the battle between bowing to the Buddha and my Christian background. Although it was often clearly stated by the teachers from whom I took direction, that one didn't have to totally abandon faith in one's original religion to practice, for example, Zen or Yoga, for me that was easier said than done. Whenever I would hear a spiritual teacher say it was okay to follow two paths at once, I would think in reply, "Sure, it is okay for you if I am a Christian and a Zen student, but is it okay with me? And is it okay with God?" But when you are searching for spiritual "truths" or knowledge, certainty is a rare commodity. Surprisingly, what I continued to find to be the case was that when I was in the midst of a personal crisis, I didn't turn to Yoga or Zen or the Buddha for repose, but to Christ and the Church. But once things would return to normal, I would again be drawn to another spiritual practice.

Despite the conflict, I continued Zen practice. It did, however, remain disturbing to bow to the Buddha, especially on Sunday, the day of Christian services. But the draw of the Church remained distant, because the peace, bliss, and emptiness experienced in meditation were still so powerful and the Zen teachings were so penetrating, profound, and unburdening. But as could be predicted, Japanese-style Zen did finally indeed begin to lose its polish. Something else was needed now: something softer, gentler, and kinder.

I searched for a teacher who would be willing to acknowledge realms other than this earthly one,

something closer to what I knew from the Catholic Church. My search led me less than a mile from my home to the Ch'an Center. (Ch'an is the Chinese predecessor of Zen.) Everyone was greeted so warmly there; the center was open most every day; and there was always a monk in residence with whom to speak. What captured me, though, was the sitting meditations and the way in which they were conducted. Everyone seemed very relaxed, and if necessary, people shifted their bodies gently when necessary. My own meditation, as a result, became deeper and more pleasant.

But it was the traditional Chinese Buddhist teachings at the Ch'an Center that planted the seed of my return to the Catholic Church. During a question-and-answer period at a Buddhist gathering with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Venerable Master Sheng-yen, one audience member asked the Dalai Lama about his attitude toward so many Westerners practicing Buddhism. His response surprised me. He said that Westerners should try to stay with the tradition in which they were raised and find their way through that practice. He added, however, that if their original practice stopped working for them, another practice, such as Buddhism, may be tried if the person is drawn to that. His remarks inspired some deep reflection. Might there be a place for me in the Catholic Church? I began to see parallels between Christian practice and the bodhisattva teachings as taught by Master Sheng-yen at the Ch'an Center. The bodhisattva teachings reminded me of the simple teachings of Christ in the Gospel to "love your neighbor and God above all

*Simple
kindness
and giving
are profound
spiritual
practices.*

things.” Simple as they are, those few words became very powerful—a new mantra of sorts—and kept resonating in my heart and mind. I kept asking myself, How do I practice being a bodhisattva? How do I love my neighbor? How do I love God? One answer appears in the *Diamond Sutra*: “If any disciple will simply practice kindness, he will soon attain *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* [unexcelled, complete awakening].”

It began to become clear that most of my spiritual practices had never extended outside of myself. It was about My sitting, My practice, My spirituality, My enlightenment. But when reflecting on the practice of kindness and giving, I realized that my most powerful spiritual experience had occurred years before, when I had been taking care of my father during the final months of his life when he was dying of cancer. In fact it was that very experience that brought me back to the spiritual quest. Before that, I really had no heartfelt practice. While my father was dying and I was providing for his needs, as painful as the experience was, there was always this inner joy of giving. In fact, when my father passed on, there was a great void in my life where caretaking for him had been. Identification of that void was the beginning of the return to spiritual practice.

Well, finally I did go to speak to my parish priest and have now been attending church services for about the past six months. There is again a definite comfortable feeling of having come home, but with a deeper, richer understanding of Christian practice resulting from participation in other traditions. Daily meditation continues to be a central aspect of my practice, and the teachings of Ch’an, Zen, and Taoism, among others, also remain integral. But most important, practice now

includes volunteer work, including volunteering at a hospice center for terminally ill patients, and going on Christian retreats to abbeys and friaries, where I can still engage in meditation but stay connected to my Christian roots. One of my latest weekend retreats was with the Franciscan Friars. Many serve God as counselors, teachers, and caretakers of the sick and destitute, following the teachings of St. Francis. They quietly run numerous soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and missions around the world, always looking for opportunities to aid the poor. And they do it all unconditionally as service to those in need, or as they call it, "Living the Gospel." I am in the midst of trying to discern whether a similar life may be the ultimate way for me to practice both Christianity and *bodhisattvahood*. I am so very thankful to be able to have had the experience of the Eastern traditions as a Westerner, yet still have the chance to return to my religious roots. I consider all these experiences to have been blessings from God. Rather than having diluted my faith, I feel these traditions collectively have strengthened it. As a result of the Buddha's teachings, I have a deeper sense of what it means to be Christian and what it means to follow in the footsteps of Christ. There are truly so many ways to be a buddha, so many ways to practice, so many ways to love.

THE WAYS OF PRAYER

Hard Thoughts on Prayer

Henry Stark



The lecturer asked us to try to define 'prayer' in one word or short phrase. We were not to use sentences. I wrote down the responses as they were offered: "speaking to God", "listening to God," "praising God," "thanking God," "asking for something," "questioning," "confession," "conversation with God." The list went on and on. As I sat there listening, I felt myself getting more and more frustrated and impatient. I started thinking: Why are these responses bothering me? The answer came quickly. Everyone was offering an activity. They felt they had to be doing something to pray. The other aspect I found troubling was that the responders were wanting to talk *to* God. When I reflected what word or phrase I would use to sum up my feelings of prayer I decided "silence" or "awareness" or "getting in touch with the deepest part of myself" would be the closest I could come.

A 1996 Newsweek poll revealed that more than half of Americans pray daily and that 29% pray more than once a

Henry Stark is a frequent contributor to SACRED JOURNEY. He will facilitate a Prayer Circle on "Unstructured Quiet Listening" at Companions on the Sacred Journey, Fellowship in Prayer's 50th Anniversary conference to be held in Princeton, NJ, June 16, 17, 18, 2000.

day. I know a lot of doubting people who pray “just in case.” In my own life the amount of my praying, and the intensity, is in direct proportion to the size of my problem(s). But when I pray I don’t do anything. I just sit there. I meditate. I try to eliminate all doing, talking, thinking. I’m more interested in listening for God. I relax and let God. I try to be. (I think this is merely an exercise in self-calming. I don’t really believe that there is a God, like a radio, who only turns on when I set something in motion.) For me, God is. “Is” means always and everywhere.

Until recently I participated in prayer circles in an attempt to heal others around the world. My experience raised some interesting and, I think, unanswerable questions. How should I pray? How much is enough? How can we track the results? Am I doing it right? Is there a better way? Should we develop surrogate pray-ers for ourselves? Are some better than others at this, like doctors and lawyers who go to graduate school? (Are ministers, rabbis, priests, etc., more effective pray-ers? Do we need them to lead us in prayer to be effective?) Am I on an ego trip thinking that I can really help others through prayer? What should be my goals in “healing?” Should I be trying to cause a remission of cancer or should I hope to develop a sense of wholeness in the ill person—or in me? Will my prayers be heard more efficiently if I pray in a house of worship rather than in my home or outdoors? Is praying aloud more effective than in silence? Does God understand all languages, accents, and dialects or would it be better if we prayed in Latin or Hebrew, for example? Should I be on my knees so God can see that I am respectful? And finally, perhaps the ultimate question, can we input human logic and expect to output spiritual truth?

I gave up the healing prayer circles because I no longer could believe in the rote repetition of phrases like, “Oh God,

we beseech Thee . . . ,” “Oh Christ, Our Master, we pray Thee to intercede with God that . . .” It all seemed to be tailored to human needs rather than just accepting God. I don’t even know what just accepting God really means—and I don’t care. To not know seems to be inherent in accepting.

If I feel that God—this superior being or energy or presence is omniscient, what sense does it make for me to tell it my problems? It knows my problems by definition. What kind of hubris am I guilty of if I pray to a God to single

*Will my
prayers be
heard if I
pray in a
house of
worship
rather than
outdoors?*

me out and help me with my problem?

In my reality, it doesn’t know of my problems because it doesn’t know anything. It doesn’t care about anything. “Know” and “care” are human verbs that we ascribe to “God,” like “Him,” “Father,” and “Lord” are made-up nouns. My superior being just is. I don’t matter to it. I’m not important to it because nothing is important to something that doesn’t judge. So I no longer ask God to let the New York

Yankees win just one more game. God is not a sports fan and doesn’t sit in the sky sorting out how many people want the Yankees to win and how many opposing Red Sox fans are praying at this particular moment. Football players gather in a kneeling circle before a game and pray. Are they praying to God to let them win? I wonder if God is counting to see which team has more pray-ers or who is more sincere. Do you think God roots for any particular team or player? Are they praying to be free of injury? If they don’t pray, will God let them break a leg because they didn’t pray? It all seems incredibly silly to me.

Prayer is a mystery. Each of us can grasp or cling to any religious belief we want and we can't be wrong because we can't prove anything. Many of us need to grasp or cling and not be proven wrong. It's basic to our entire value system and helps to determine our self esteem. I think there are people who attend religious services because it makes them comfortable, even smug, to be able to recite, word for word, the service amidst the icons of their particular sect. They need to believe or their self-image will unravel. But what does this say for their faith in "God?"

There are people who say others are wrong or praying ineffectively or that they are praying within the wrong religious organization or that they are doomed to "hell" unless they convert to brand X religion. I think we should all be uncertain—and respectful of others. I also believe that it can be dangerous when someone prays and depends on divine intervention to solve problems that they should be working on themselves. Prayer doesn't always have to be beneficial.

So where does this leave me? In the dark, so to speak. I do have faith in something that I don't want to attempt to define too closely. Energy is probably the closest word in the English dictionary. I meditate with the hope of having the everyday clutter of life disappear and to reach my "true self," "to be in touch with God." I have had a few deep spiritual experiences and revelations, but I don't know very much about prayer. It's a mystery to you and it's a mystery to me. And that's the way I think I'd like to leave it.

SPIRITUALITY & HEALING

Illness as Icon

Barbara Knight Katz



Stay still; pay attention.

Be gentle with myself and others. These are things I have learned this past year. The time began with words that slammed against my ears so hard I became numb: "It is malignant. You have breast cancer . . . mumble, mumble . . ."

My doctor's mouth was moving, but I was falling into deafening fear. I buried my face in my husband's chest.

Days later, waiting in pre-op, I clutched a few sprigs of lavender from my garden for calming. I recited a poem over and over for protection.

Once in surgery, I asked that a favorite audiotope be played until the surgery was over. I shared a hospital room with a woman who vomited violently all night, so instead of sleeping, I dragged my I.V. pole up and down the hall as I paced the hours until morning. Then I went home.

After twenty-five years of teaching political philosophy, Barbara Knight Katz now is in private practice as a pastoral counselor. An ordained elder with Arlington Presbyterian Church, Barbara lives with her husband in Virginia.

Rainer Rilke wrote, "Near is the land called 'Life' by humanity. By its gravity you'll know you have found it." He might have been writing of the land I entered after my diagnosis. It is a strange land and the gravity is sometimes overwhelming. The poem ends as God says to the spirit-soul about to enter clay form: "Give me your hand." Before I could hear these words and respond, I spent a long and terrifying period in a dark space. I had left behind an innocence I had known for fifty-nine years, the time before breast cancer. I could never go back.

Who I was now and how to move beyond this place were unclear to me. For weeks I seemed to live between two realms. I returned telephone calls, wrote thank-you notes, ate grapefruit for breakfast and tried to match up clean pairs of socks. I showed up for appointments, read about cancer treatments and took charge of selecting my healing team, even changing my surgeon and my oncologist for a better "fit." I listened to the "survival statistics" for various treatments and got tattooed for radiation therapy. I chose nutritious foods, meditated, took flower essences for emotional healing and began biofeedback training to boost my immune system. I continued to meet my pastoral counseling clients. I tried to pray.

I also spent time in an inner underworld that stunned me with its darkness. Since my prognosis is very good and I believe I am currently cancer-free, the enormity of my feelings surprised me. I was surrounded by family and friends, life-rafts for this storm, but I often felt bereft and overwhelmed. I had no awareness of God with me in this place. Waves of terror and panic washed over me at unexpected moments and I wept.

I struggled with exhortations to "fight this thing," which did not seem apt to me. I faced continual reminders

that the medical professionals will never consider me “cured” of breast cancer; the fact that it can return after ten or even twenty years leads most practitioners of Western medicine to categorize breast cancer “survivors” at best as “currently symptom-free.” I didn’t know what verb tense to use to name my condition. Did I *have* breast cancer? Had I *had* it, but not now?

Guidelines for imagery to enhance the healing power of radiation all suggested that I imagine the radiation doing “something” (fight? surround? melt?) to the cancer cells. But since no further cancer was found in the lumpectomy, I didn’t want to “imagine” it into my body. I settled for the image of “cleaning out debris or unwanted cells” and described myself as “having had breast cancer surgery.” These solutions felt right, but did not resolve my quandary about how to relate to the ambiguity of my status.

Jean Shinoda Bolen’s book, *Close to the Bone: The Inner Meaning of Life Threatening Illness*, gave me a compass that I could use in this uncharted territory to make sense of what was happening. Like Persephone plunged into Hades and Inanna passing through the nine gates to her sister Erishkegal’s underworld, I was stripped of my sense of myself and of landmarks with which I defined my world. It was a relief to grasp some of the inner meaning of what I was experiencing and of its impact on me, beyond the physical level. Reading about its archetypal dimensions, I felt validated; I was not just suffering from a failure of nerve. I developed rituals to hold my grief and uncertainty and to honor turning points and thresholds that were part of the treatment process.

In my post-surgery discomfort, lying only on my right side, I often slept badly. When my surgeon was away, a substitute removed my bandages. As a medical student

watched, he ripped off the bandages and they both peered and poked at the new scar which I had not yet seen without even addressing me personally. I felt violated and I was angry, partly at myself, because I behaved as a “docile patient” and made no objection. I resolved to be more assertive, a good steward for myself. One night I dreamed that a menacing figure was threatening me. As it was about to attack, I awoke in heart-pounding terror. When I slept again, I dreamed that I was hugely pregnant, cared for by a strong and loving midwife. She protected and comforted me in a safe, quiet, sacred space as we waited for the new life to develop fully, to be ready for birth.

Bolen’s book and this dream were turning points for me. My illness and recovery had plunged me into a cauldron that became an alchemical vessel. I was being taken down to my essence, stripped of the roles and coverings that have protected me. I have learned that courage is not being unafraid, but comes as I keep on in the face of my fears. In this underworld, if I hold to the experience and remain conscious and faithful, I come through it. I did not choose this illness, but it is now part of my life story, and I can choose the stance I take toward it and myself.

Being in natural surroundings brings me into a liminal, healing space. I am startled by the beauty of sunlight dancing on water and a silent, elegant heron lifting off to glide down river. My time in the underworld has given me knowledge I did not have before. I have learned to be still, to wait. I have fewer moments of sadness and confusion; I am more centered and at peace. I laugh more

*I did not
choose this
illness but I
can choose
the stance I
take toward
it and
myself.*

often. When I weep, I may not know the reason; it is part of the process. This is where I am.

Now I know that a person of faith can feel abandoned and empty of prayers. But friends and family did not let me go. Friends sent chocolates, fruits and cards; brought dinners, books and hugs. My women's spirituality group decided to organize a support system to sustain me through whatever treatment I chose. My church community was temporarily without a pastor, so the congregation ministered to me. They prayed for me, reached out, fed and loved me.

I remember the sounds of my granddaughters' beautiful voices, Joanna reading to my dying mother from the *Living Bible*: "Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything that I need," and Laura singing "Tender Shepherd." These became mantras guiding me through thirty radiation treatments. My daughter's loving warmth and optimism, my son-in-law's strength and humor, my step-children's prayers and good counsel were palpable comforts. My husband's tender care and love surrounded me at all times. I have come to recognize that *they* are God's love with me.

My life will never be the same since my diagnosis. I would probably trade in the "gift" of breast cancer for a refund in a heartbeat. But perhaps I would do that only if I could keep the changes that are happening in me. I am learning to live with ambiguity and to sense that it can be open spaciousness. My illness is an icon for God's grace. In this gracious place, I float free in the sea that is God's love.

A T R A N S F O R M I N G E X P E R I E N C E

The Joys of Living Simply

Lorraine V. Murray

Too often, the word “frugal” suggests “selfish,” with images of Scrooge popping to mind. But as my husband and I have mastered the fine art of downscaling, we’ve discovered the opposite is true. Frugality can nurture a life of joyous service to others.



When we married, Jef and I relished restaurant splurges, trendy clothes, and seaside jaunts. Having abandoned our childhood faiths years ago, we gave little thought to community service. Instead we were consumers par excellence, earning money to spend it. Then we had two wake-up calls.

In 1993, a friend gave us *Your Money or Your Life*, a provocative book by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez that contained nine steps to financial independence, integrity, and intelligence. By following the steps, Dominguez had left paid employment at age thirty, devoting the rest of his life to service.

Lorraine Murray, a writer from Decatur, GA, recently reached her goal to radically simplify her life. No longer tied to full-time paid employment, she divides her time between free-lance writing and service work.

The book asked us to delve deep to discover the emotions that prompted our splurges. As we reflected on the role of money in our lives, we began freeing ourselves from the “earn to spend” cycle. It didn’t happen overnight, but gradually we eliminated all our debts—including our mortgage.

The book also challenged us to discover what really mattered to us. We asked of each purchase: Will this bring me true fulfillment? Does it reflect my values? Just what are my values anyway? And if we had only a year left to live, what would we do? Somehow shopping and splurging seemed a sad answer.

The second call came quickly on the heels of the first.

Returning from a business trip to New York, Jef mentioned he’d visited St. Patrick’s Cathedral where he’d lit candles in memory of his dad and my parents, who had died years ago. I felt stricken. A keynote of Catholicism, my childhood faith, is praying for the living and the dead. I’d failed on both scores.

Once the spark of our Christian faith was reignited, we began attending Mass at a nearby church and were surprised by the numerous scriptural passages containing warnings about trying to serve two masters, God and money. We also were deeply touched by the scene where Christ washes his disciples’ feet as a sign of loving service.

One Sunday we met four nuns sent to Atlanta by Mother Teresa to open a home for poor women with AIDS. When we began helping the nuns renovate a dilapidated house, we saw firsthand how frugality and service go hand in hand. The sisters, who take their vows of poverty seriously, don’t fritter away their time desiring, buying and caring for the latest trappings of middle class life. Instead, they devote their time to joyfully serving the poorest of the poor.

In the past, our Saturdays had been spent largely on me-centered activities like movies or shopping. I loved cruising the aisles at Macy's checking out the latest fashions. If I was happy, I went to the mall. If I was lonely or depressed, I went to the mall. It was my all-purpose "fix."

But as our lives changed, I started avoiding the mall. For over a year, Jef and I spent our Saturdays in old work clothes helping the sisters and other volunteers transform the house into a beautiful home that was eventually named the Gift of Grace.

After reading *Your Money or Your Life*, Jef and I became intensely conscious of the fact that money represented our life energy, the hours we spent at our jobs. Since that energy is precious and limited, we stopped squandering it. It was easy giving up our weekly restaurant splurges, since Jef loves cooking at home. This simple gesture saved us about \$200 monthly. Checking books out of the library instead of buying them and shopping for clothes in thrift stores meant hundreds of dollars more saved each month.

Most importantly, we learned to ask ourselves, "Do I have enough?"

Clothing, furniture, jewelry, linens—overwhelmingly, our answer was "yes." If the answer was "too much," it was time to weed out the extras for charitable causes.

We still exchange gifts with family and friends at Christmas and on birthdays, but we don't go into debt as in the old days. Our gifts now may be a bottle of Jef's delicious homemade wine, a plate of my homemade cookies or chocolates, or some of Jef's artwork.

Turning off the television made a big difference. We were relieved of endless consumer temptations, while also gaining back about four hours a day—precious time to devote to our new ministries.

I discovered I was being called to Eucharistic ministry—taking the body of Christ to shut-ins and people who are too ill to attend Mass. Jef and I also joined the choir, and since we were eager to share what we'd learned about simplifying our lives, we launched a voluntary simplicity study group three years ago at our church.

Some beautiful changes have blossomed in the lives of people who have joined our group. One woman had been in a lucrative medical career for thirty-four years, but had long since lost interest in her work. She loved art history so she began volunteering at a museum, and it wasn't long before she was offered a paid position there. But she decided to work only thirty hours weekly, so she'd have an extra ten hours for service work. Even though she now makes only a fourth of her original salary, she describes her life as more joyful than ever.

A married couple in the group discovered they could make ends meet even without the wife's salary. Now their two small children are no longer in day-care and the wife has more time for her family and for service. She conducts a weekly communion service at a nursing home, takes senior citizens to doctors' appointments and volunteers as a school nurse at her children's school.

In the past few years, I found myself growing increasingly discontented with my work as an editor at a university thirty miles from my home. Not only was the two-hour round trip commute exhausting and costly, but the environment was stressful. There seemed to be a perpetual air of sadness in my office.

I felt God was calling me to more service work, and I decided I could no longer tell him, "Wait a while longer." I didn't want my epitaph to read, "She made a good salary with nice benefits." So about a year ago I bid

farewell to my lucrative job.

No longer tied to a job that was requiring over twelve hours a day, counting the commute and “decompression” time after work, I have time for service work as well as writing.

Now there’s time to take my eighty-five-year-old friend to lunch once in a while and time to visit my one-year-old goddaughter. I volunteer often at the Gift of Grace AIDS hospice and conduct a bimonthly communion service at a nursing home. I’ve also increased my involvement in Eucharistic ministry. And every so often, I enjoy volunteering to help prepare lunch in the cafeteria of a nearby school. Jef and I still facilitate a study group on simplicity twice monthly and also have begun a new group exploring the connection between simplicity and compassion.



Skjoldphotographs.com

I don't want to sound too saintly. It would be a mistake to say I'm now completely free from all the temptations of a consumer society. I still make a conscious effort to avoid the mall and have to periodically track down clutter in our home.

But the rewards of down scaling are enormous. Our lives are filled with more joy now than when we were high spenders.

Living simply doesn't require that you move to a farm. Jef and I live in a city of 14,000 people just a cat's whisker away from the booming metropolis of Atlanta. Yet, even though we have only a quarter acre of land, we enjoy it immensely, and have planted blackberry and blueberry bushes, a fig tree, grape vines, and a small vegetable garden.

It's not easy swimming upstream. In many ways, our consumer society encourages an underlying addiction to buying and accumulating goods as a cure-all for life's ills. As with alcoholism or drug abuse, one can't easily shake the consumer habit alone. That's why our study group at church has been so important.

Prayer is also necessary to free oneself from any addiction and start a new life. In the effort to simplify one's life, reading the scriptures and reflecting on Jesus' life is crucial. In so many passages of the New Testament, he warns against the danger of becoming too attached to material wealth. He was born in poverty and devoted his life to serving the poor. And he promised us joy if we follow his path: "I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly."

A lovely outgrowth of frugality in our lives has been a deep sense of gratitude. In coming to grips with how much is enough, one becomes filled with thankfulness for all one has been given.

As the Shaker song says, it truly is a "gift to be simple."

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